

The Council of Baptist Prisoners' Relatives: 1964-1972

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No organisation for the defence of men and women imprisoned because of their beliefs existed in any Communist country before 1964. Such an organisation was then formed by members of the Evangelical Christian and Baptist Church.

On 23 February 1964 the inaugural All-Union Conference of ECB Prisoners' Relatives took place in Moscow. The delegates to it, members of unregistered Baptist congregations of the illegal Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians and Baptists (CCECB), met in order to consider what could best be done to help members of their families who were serving sentences in prisons and labour camps as a result of their Christian activities.

The establishment of the Council of Prisoners' Relatives (CPR) was a new departure, precipitated no doubt by the need of prisoners' wives and mothers to stand together in difficult circumstances and the awareness that concerted action on their relatives' behalf was infinitely better than that of isolated individuals. But it was in no sense a departure from the traditions of the independent Baptist movement, which, by its establishment in 1961, formed a coherent platform for unregistered congregations, firmly based on a knowledge of legal and constitutional matters and a grasp of the need for mutual support. The CPR was to carry on these traditions, and indeed it could be said that, since the imprisonment of most reform Baptist leaders and their subsequent life in hiding, it is now the chief bearer of the reformers' standard.

The 1964 Conference set out the tasks and objectives of the new Council. These were, firstly to keep church members informed about persecutions and imprisonments in all parts of the USSR so as to encourage prayer for those in need, and secondly to petition the Soviet government on behalf of the sufferers. A third task was essential to these two: that of keeping files on all prisoners and children of Christian parents taken into the care of the State.

In accordance with these principles the Conference compiled as complete a list as possible of prisoners sentenced between 1961 and 1964, drew up a statement of the violations of the Constitution of the USSR about which they had evidence and composed a letter to all believers asking them to send information about events in their areas. Having elected a

Council of three prisoners' wives to carry out their policy, the conference was adjourned.

In the eight years since 1964 a steady flow of documents has been reaching the West through the CPR. These have a distinctive manner, presenting a wealth of circumstantial detail about the oppression of believers by the Soviet government and displaying a sound knowledge of constitutional law. The documents are marked by a complete integrity and objectivity: although they are often moving in the extreme, whether through the depth of their pathos or the demonstration of the endurance of Christian joy under duress, they can never be said to be emotionally presented. It is the stark facts themselves which impress.

A second and even more remarkable feature is the attitude of the writers towards the authorities, which at no time betrays the slightest bitterness. A report to the churches on the situation in September 1969 makes this exhortation:

The CPR is aware that as a result of the numerous cases of oppression and persecution of ECB believers, for their faith in God, a feeling of resentment towards the oppressors may be aroused in some. The CPR considers it essential to remind all believers that they should not tolerate these resentful feelings towards their oppressors, but should pray for the slanderers and oppressors.

Very early the Council realised that their appeals to the government were having no effect and began to turn towards the West for help. Among many others, a letter to U Thant at the United Nations dated 5 June 1967 stated that:

All our petitions to the government of our country up to the present have had no results. The government evades any direct answer to the pleas of the relatives of prisoners. Because of this, we have decided to appeal to you, as the world's highest authority.

Copies of further pleas to the Soviet government are also commonly sent to organizations in the West. In December 1970 the second conference of the CPR sent appeals to the President of the Baptist World Alliance and to all Christians of the world asking for their help. Not only did they ask for prayer, but also that petitions be sent to the Soviet authorities by churches abroad, for which a suggested text was given. They appealed to the Church in the West in these terms:

If you keep silent now, deliverance and freedom to preach the Gospel will still come—but let this not happen without our taking part in it, for what should we say to Jesus? How have we carried out His command of love?

As well as being the mouthpiece of the persecuted Church before the Soviet government and the Western world, the CPR has fulfilled a vital function within the CCECB. Information on events in all parts of the

USSR is circulated with the object of enabling Russian Christians to pray for their brethren, and indeed to give material help. A letter of June 1968 reports that three hundred families of prisoners, comprising two thousand people, had been provided for by the churches. Thanks are given especially for gifts of children's clothing and shoes. Reports to the believers also often contain a message of encouragement to sufferers, the assurance of God's presence with them and of the prayers of their fellow-believers.

A third major achievement of the CPR has been the regular production of "prisoner lists". These are stark documents, providing now the bare details of each prisoner's name and date of birth, date of arrest, the article of the Criminal Code under which he was condemned, the length and type of his sentence, his home address, number of dependants and the address of the prison or camp where he is held. Several hundred names have now reached the West in this way, the nearest thing we possess to statistics on the persecution of Baptist groups. Information contained in these lists has become more detailed over the years.

December 1970, as has been already mentioned, saw the second conference of the Council of Prisoners' Relatives in Kiev, attended by 72 delegates. Overshadowed as it must have been by the recent arrest of its president, Lidia Vins, the Conference edited a remarkable collection of documents, including the appeal to the Church in the West already quoted. Appeals were also sent to the Soviet government on behalf of various individuals, including Mrs. Vins. A new prisoner list was included, as well as a protest against the slandering of Christians in the press, backed by a carefully compiled list of 66 relevant articles. On a more human note, there is a poem written by a prisoner and the testimony of three young girls willing to stand for the Gospel of Christ. The CPR had come a long way since the previous conference with its declaration of ideals, and was now an experienced "clearing house" for information on the Russian Baptists.

The collection of documents from the 1970 conference could be seen as the forerunner of the first issue of the *Bulletin of the Council of Prisoners' Relatives*, which appeared in April 1971 and contained the report of a further conference held in Moscow, this time of an enlarged Council. This first issue was to set the pattern for subsequent ones: it contained copies of appeals sent to the government, exhortations to the church and news of events from far and wide. Five issues appeared altogether in 1971, and four have so far reached the West for 1972. Some are of a general nature, while others concentrate on a particular individual, such as Gennadi

Kryuchkov (September 1971) and Lidia Vins (July 1971), the transcript of whose trial is given.

The most recent *Bulletin* to reach the West (No. 9)¹ is perhaps the most remarkable of them all. The events recounted are themselves dramatic. Ivan Moiseyev, a young Soviet soldier, was killed after he had resisted all attempts to stop him bearing witness to Christ. But the *Bulletin* contains much more : a meticulous collection of evidence on all aspects of the case. Not only do we have the statements of his parents and neighbours and of fellow-soldiers, but also letters which Ivan wrote home before his death and transcripts of tapes which he made on his last home leave, telling of his experiences in the army. We come to know Ivan as a person, and not merely as a case history.

The *Bulletin* is remarkable in another sense, too. There is no emphasis on the horror and tragedy of these events, beyond a deep sympathy for the young man's relatives. The details of his violent death are factually recounted and unembellished. The *Bulletin* prefers to dwell on Moiseyev's testimony to the power and grace of God, which enabled him to stand up to the pressure put on him because of his faith, and to face the premonition he had of his death, if not without fear, at least with great fortitude. It ends, too, with a fresh exhortation to love and pray for the persecutors.

A Soviet journalist (letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, 16 December 1972) has subsequently confirmed the death of Moiseyev, while claiming it was an accident.

One may here note that over twelve years the reform Baptists have proved their integrity over and over again. To this day no document from them has turned out to be falsified, no single piece of information untrue. In view of the conditions in which they live, this is a remarkable achievement.

The CPR avoids dwelling too much on the negative side of the Church's life, emphasising the flowering of faith under persecution. It discourages hatred, but seeks reconciliation based on justice, and the establishment of the Christian's right to contribute something entirely positive to the society in which he lives.

¹ No. 10 has reached the West since this was written and will be discussed in the next issue of this journal.